



In Rural Louisiana, ICE Is Dropping Off Waves Of Detainees At Bus Stops And Local Airports

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Elisabeth Grant-Gibson

Natchez Network's Elisabeth Grant-Gibson speaks with detainees released from River Correctional Center inside the Baton Rouge Bus Station.

Advocates say they're glad immigrants are being let out of detention but worry the chaotic nature of the releases could cause a 'crisis.'



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On Friday evening eight men, all asylum seekers from Cuba, recently released from U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement custody, gathered on the back porch of a simple house in New Orleans' St. Roch neighborhood to listen to Martha Alguera, a short, commanding Nicaraguan-American woman who runs an immigrants rights organization called Voces Unidas: Louisiana Immigrants Rights Coalition.

She explained to them in Spanish that she would work with a non-profit called Miles for Migrants to help them find flights to their final destinations. The group donates frequent flyer miles to immigrants being released from detention. Alguera had arranged for the men to stay at the house where they were gathered until their flights were arranged, within the next few days.

Most were headed to Miami to join their sponsors — people who accept financial responsibility for asylum seekers while they go through the asylum process. They were released on parole after proving to immigration officers that they had a credible fear of persecution in their home country.

Earlier that day the men and several others were bused from River Correctional Center, a for-profit immigration detention facility owned by LaSalle Corrections, in Ferriday, Louisiana, to the Baton Rouge Bus Station.

It was the second large-scale release from the center that week. And, according to advocates, there were other such releases throughout the state. Local news sources have reported that [75 immigrants recently released from detention were dropped off at Monroe Regional Airport](#) last week; another [80 from Haiti were taken to Shreveport, drawing criticism of the Biden Administration from Sen. Bill Cassidy](#); and [more than 90 were transported from Adams County Correctional Center in Natchez, Miss. to the Natchez Transit System bus station](#) between last Monday and Wednesday.

ICE would not provide total numbers of immigrants released from detention in recent days or weeks. But advocates who help to transport immigrants let out of detention centers to local airports say ICE in Louisiana has gone from releasing just a few people from detention centers each week to letting out dozens almost daily, leaving volunteers



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Yosuan, 30, who was a teacher in Cuba, was held in detention for nearly four months. Most of that time was spent at River Correctional.

"I had this idea that River Correctional Center was a funnel. So many people entered, very few leave," he said.

Then, in the last week, Yosuan noticed a shift.

"All of a sudden - 100 left, the other day 60. None of us thought this could happen," he said.

He and the other men at the house asked to be identified by their first names for fear that their full identification would affect their asylum cases.

Across the river, Elisabeth Grant-Gibson runs the Natchez Network. When immigrants are set for release, family members will contact her to organize transportation. Then she dispatches volunteers through busy WhatsApp messaging chains with calls for drivers to head to detention centers or to areas where she knows ICE will drop released detainees off. All day volunteers chime in about their whereabouts and estimated times of arrival and what they're doing to help immigrants that they take in their charge.

"It is frenetic because everything happens moment by moment [and] unfolds throughout the entire day," she said.

Once Grant-Gibson knows who will be released Alguera begins working in New Orleans to find the detainees safe housing if they need to stay the night before they board their flights or buses. She organizes food donations from local restaurants and will meet with detainees to make sure their travel arrangements are set.

"My day started at four in the morning when I was texting Elisabeth, about all this," Alguera said at roughly 9 p.m. on Friday evening. "It doesn't stop unless I turn off my phone."

She and Grant-Gibson say the number of alerts about releases began to increase roughly two weeks ago. And beginning last Monday they ballooned.

According to Grant-Gibson, on Monday July 12, Adams County Detention Center in



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and women and Winn Correctional Center released 78 men.

There were more releases on Tuesday. Then on Wednesday Gibson became inundated with calls about people being let out of River Correctional Center. She called the facility.

“I said, ‘Are you guys working on a release for today?’ And she said, ‘Yes.’ And I said, ‘Can you tell me how many people?’ And she said, ‘100. ... and we’re releasing another 100 on Friday.’”

Prior to last Wednesday, Grant-Gibson said the largest group of people she organized pick up for from River was 18 people.

“A double digit number from there is very unusual. It’s too small a facility. By Friday half of their population is going to be gone,” she said last in an interview last week.

Volunteers like Grant-Gibson have not seen releases like these because the New Orleans ICE Field Office — which manages detention centers in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas and Tennessee — became known for lengthy detention times during the Trump administration. In May 2019, the Southern Poverty Law Center and the American Civil Liberties Union of Louisiana filed a [class action lawsuit](#) against the Trump administration’s Departments of Homeland Security and Immigration and Customs Enforcement and against the New Orleans ICE Field Office because ICE officers in the region were not granting asylum seekers parole even when they met the legal requirements for it.

A recent [study by Tulane University Law School’s Immigrants Rights Clinic](#) showed that immigrants who filed habeas corpus petitions arguing for their release between 2010 and 2020 in the Western District of Louisiana had been in detention for more than a year before even filing. Some had been repeatedly denied parole.

In a statement an ICE spokesperson said, “In accordance with the civil immigration enforcement priorities directed by DHS, ICE is focusing its limited resources on national security, border security, and public safety. ICE will continue to carry out the duties of enforcing the laws of the United States to further the security and safety of our communities.”

Grant-Gibson said before March 2021 all of the immigrants that she would pick up in



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The number of immigrants in U.S. detention centers has grown from less than 14,000 people in March to 27,217 as of July 8, according to data from the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse or TRAC. On July 8, Louisiana housed 2,347 people in immigration detention, the second highest number of immigrants in ICE custody in the country after Texas.

Grant-Gibson said she's happy to see ICE releasing immigrants from detention more quickly, but she believes the way they've handled the releases could cause a crisis.

Like the other men we interviewed who were released from River Correctional on Friday July 16, Yosuan's parole document shows that he was granted parole on Wednesday, July 14. But he and the other men say they only learned they'd be released that morning, with little to no time to call people in their support systems to book flights and to organize transportation from rural Louisiana to a nearby airport.

"It was something that happened very fast," Yosuan said.

"They said, 'Just go. You have to leave. No time to call,'" added Raduel, another man who'd just been released.

According to Grant-Gibson, ICE officers organized bus transportation from River Correctional to the Baton Rouge Bus Station. From there some volunteers transported men, like Yosuan and Raduel, to New Orleans to arrange where they could stay the night with local volunteer hosts and organize flights to their destinations. Others helped people book bus tickets from Baton Rouge and got them hotel rooms if their buses were not leaving that day. But Grant-Gibson said in previous releases from River, immigrants were simply let out of the facility with little to no money, cell phones that do not work in the United States and no real sense for where they were.

"The rural areas just simply do not have adequate infrastructure for them to be releasing people and thinking somehow there will be enough volunteers [and] there will be enough family who drive to pick people up," Grant-Gibson said.

On Friday, several immigrants rights advocacy groups filed a federal administrative complaint alleging that ICE in Louisiana and Mississippi are committing "blatant violations of the Performance-Based national Detention Standards 2011 regarding



It claimed, among other things, that immigrants were being released without having the opportunity to contact their families; that several people were left waiting for hours inside detention center lobbies or outside of detention centers for transportation; and that ICE has encouraged families to pay for taxis that cost up to \$600 to transport their loved ones from detention facilities to airports and other transportation hubs.

Immigration advocates have begun alerting the public to the unfolding situation in Louisiana and Mississippi through the social media hashtag, #LouisianaICEScandal.

Shalina Chatlani contributed to reporting this story.

Correction: A previous version of this story listed Grant-Gibson as Gibson and Voces Unidas: Louisiana Immigrants Rights Coalition as Voces Unidas New Orleans.

Immigration



Bobbi-Jeanne Misick

Bobbi-Jeanne Misick is the justice, race and equity reporter for the Gulf States Newsroom, a collaboration between NPR, WWNO in New Orleans, WBHM in Birmingham, Alabama and MPB-Mississippi Public Broadcasting in Jackson. She is also an Ida B. Wells Fellow with Type Investigations at Type Media Center.

[See stories by Bobbi-Jeanne Misick](#)



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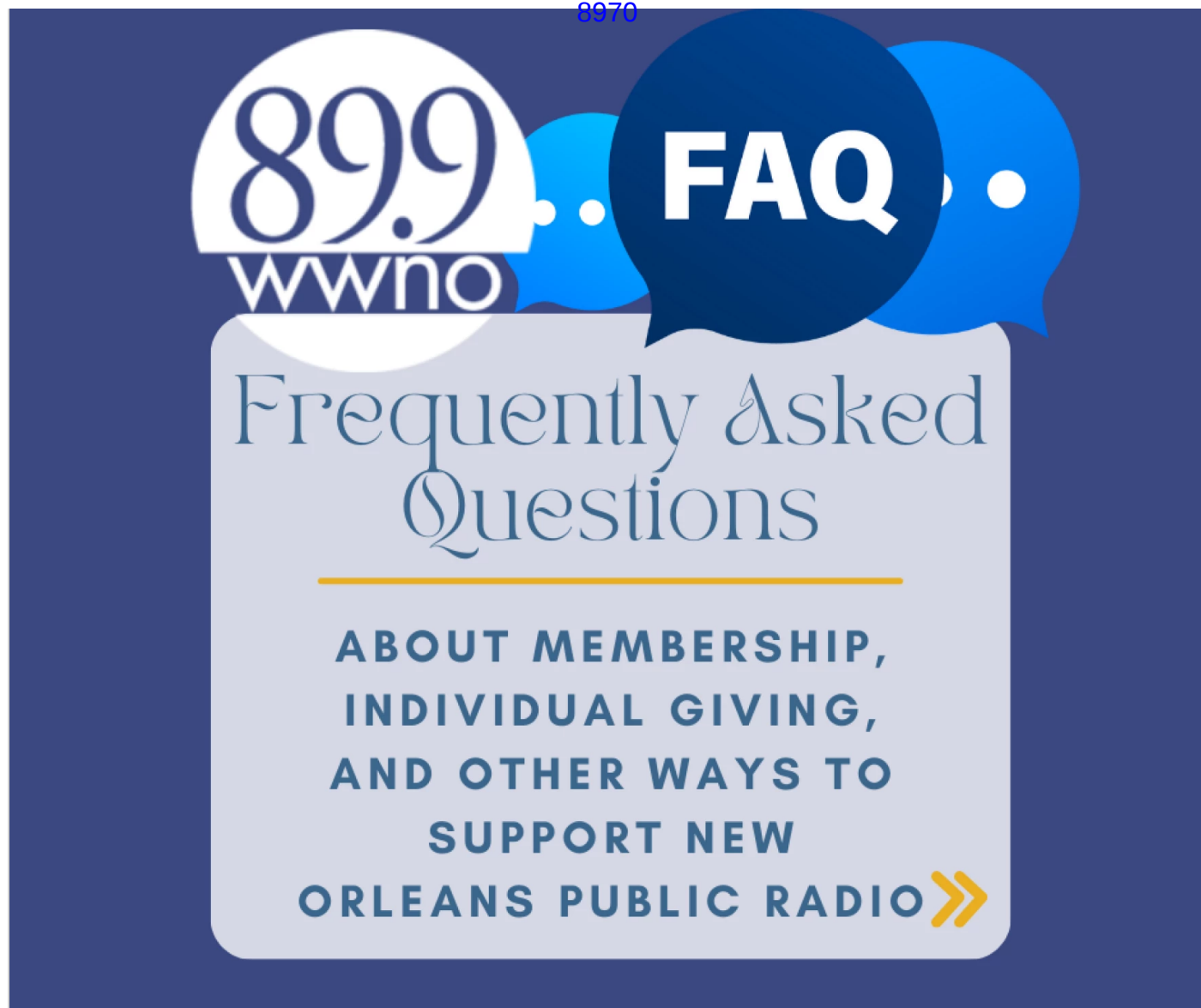
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